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II Timothy 1:1-14

At this particular moment in history I am convinced that the witness of the global Church to the American Church is crucial, for as the late D. T. Niles, former Executive Secretary for Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, stated, “The gospel is never safe in any culture unless there is a witness from beyond that culture.” It is difficult to imagine a more apt—and provocative—theme to ponder on World Communion Sunday.

At first it might seem strange to think that the Gospel cannot be “safe” in the PC(USA) unless we have a witness from the Church in distant places like Asia and Africa. After all we have stellar seminaries, don’t we? PC(USA) pastors are highly trained to exegete scripture and to understand the cultural and historical contexts of biblical narratives, and they receive excellent training in systematic theology. We also have a form of government where each congregation is connected and accountable to our presbyteries for “rightly preaching the Gospel.” How could we slip into heresy with such [well-trained] leadership? How could the Gospel not be “safe” in such competent hands?

However, as we look at the sociopolitical “lay of the land” in the United States—sky-rocketing levels of gun violence, racial discrimination and scandalous treatment of refugees and their children—we might begin to have doubts. And when we consider the apathy, even complicity, with which many American Christians respond, an observer might indeed conclude that the Gospel does not seem “safe” in the hands of the US Church. Could a witness “from beyond” help us more clearly understand this Gospel and its implications for a life of faithful witness to the Lord Jesus Christ in these perilous days? While the witness from the global church partners to the PC(USA) takes place all over the world, I invite you to look at it through the lens of my particular area of work and experience, which is with the Church in Africa.

Thousands of Presbyterians are engaged in mutual witness with the churches in Africa through what we term “mission partnerships,” some of which are at the congregational level, while others are presbytery partnerships. There are currently 36 presbyteries that have these formal ties with our partner churches in Africa, and they are based on deep and lasting relationships often spanning a couple of decades. While World Mission’s guidance is for new partnerships to initially focus on relationship building, from my perspective, the motivation to enter mission partnerships is often to assist African church partners as they minister to overwhelming physical and spiritual needs in their midst. That might be addressing prenatal health in places like Niger, where the infant mortality rate is one of the highest in the world, or training pastors in Malawi, which has one Presbyterian pastor for every 7,000 lay people. While sharing our resources is absolutely vital, it is soon apparent to most Presbyterians engaged in these partnerships that receiving is every bit as important as giving; the Church in Africa has many gifts to share and much to teach us. I believe that the witness from the African Church can help us to more clearly see the

breadth and depth of the Gospel and help us to save it from being misappropriated for destructive political ends.

This first chapter of II Timothy provides helpful guidance to PC(USA) congregations and mid councils as we engage in the work of mutual witness, or mutual mission, so let's take a closer look. As Paul writes to Timothy and the group of believers he was leading, it is clear that they were feeling discouraged. They were finding it increasingly difficult to live as Christians in their context, to the point that they were actually feeling ashamed to be identified as followers of Jesus. One of the things which must have been discouraging to them was that, according to verse 18 in the following chapter, there were many who were wandering away from the essentials of the Gospel and were actually driving people away from God. Does this sound familiar? Could we be at this very spot in the U.S. as we face a situation in which many Christians are not only turning a deaf ear to the escalation of human rights violations and increasing levels of poverty that we are facing in the U.S., but even opposing policies and services to address these atrocities? In the same way that Paul exhorted Timothy to keep the faith, *if* we have ears to hear and *if* we have the humility to sit at the feet of the African Church in a learning posture, I believe that our African partners have much to teach us about being faithful to the Gospel in the midst of these discouraging times where the witness of the U.S. Church at large seems to be compromised. This passage gives us some helpful guidelines on taking on that posture of learning as we engage in mutual witness/mutual mission in our partnerships with churches around the world.

- It is crucial to make prayer central in our partnerships. As verse 3 states, we need to be “constantly remembering” each other in prayer. As we exchange prayer requests and prayer practices, I believe our own practices of congregational prayer will be deepened.
- We need to make face-to-face time happen. Paul recognized this need in verse 4, and it is crucial for mission partnerships to thrive. Modern technology provides a range of tools, such as WhatsApp, FaceTime and mobile phone service, to enable such connections.
- Take time in your partnerships to share stories of faith, testimonies of what Christ is up to in our churches and our lives. (vs. 8)
- Be willing to join in suffering for the sake of the Gospel (vs. 8). To *join* is to intentionally step into something—not to just cope with what life sends you. As our partners suffer, we must be ready to step into solidarity with them through sacrificial actions, including advocacy and meeting concrete needs, which look beyond our own immediate interests.
- Listen carefully to learn how your partner understands God to have been at work in their culture “before the ages began” as well as how an encounter with Jesus, who “abolished death and brought life,” has transformed them. (vs. 9-10)
- Also listen to the stories of how your partner has suffered in order to guard the Gospel, with which they have been entrusted, from being twisted and truncated and what they have learned from their mistakes. Find out how the Holy Spirit has equipped them to do this work. (vs. 14) Many of our partners seem more attuned to the work of the Holy Spirit than American Christians.

Assuming this posture of exercising cultural humility and learning at the feet of the global church is hard work for American Christians, and this passage also has a word of guidance for us as we seek to do that. Paul writes in verse 8 “do not be ashamed then of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner” because in order for Timothy to take counsel and learn from Paul, he had to have confidence in him and not be ashamed of him. But this cannot have been easy for Timothy because in the viewpoint of the secular world Paul didn't get it right . . . after all, he landed in jail, didn't he? It pains me to say it, but

sometimes I encounter Presbyterians who seem ashamed and dismissive of the African church, insinuating that its theology is less developed, less sophisticated than ours. Every time I hear the saying the African church is a mile wide but an inch deep, I cringe! Mutual learning will be virtually impossible if this is our attitude. But I think it's important to note that we are not hearing this critique from those engaged in deep partnership relationships with African churches. Imperfect as these relationships may be, as they are affected by inescapable dynamics of power and privilege, when Presbyterians assume and practice the posture of cultural humility and learning, there has been real transformation. Mission partnerships and other programs of the Presbyterian Mission Agency enable us to hear the voice of the global church. I believe that because of these relationships the Gospel has indeed become "safer" from distortion because . . .

When we hear the voice of Rt. Reverend Peter Gai, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan, who risked his life standing guard at the church compound entrance, refusing entry to soldiers who wanted to come in to go after the thousands of people who were fleeing interethnic violence and seeking refuge, our understanding of the Gospel mandate to actively engage in the struggle to combat racial and ethnic injustice in the U.S. is strengthened.

When we learn about the work of the Evangelical Church of the Republic of Niger's deep involvement in both dialogue to promote peaceful co-existence and responsible Christian witness, it enlarges our view of living out the Gospel in interfaith settings and motivates us to engage in deeper relationships with our Muslim sisters and brothers. Members of the Synod of the Covenant will be hearing this witness firsthand this fall through the Mission to the USA program.

At a time when we struggle to understand and live out the holistic nature of the Gospel and American Christians are polarized on issues of justice and evangelism, the witness of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian speaks to us. CCAP fully embraces the San Antonio World Council of Churches' Message, "a proclamation which does not hold forth the promises of the justice of the kingdom to the poor of the earth is a caricature of the gospel. A Christian participation in the struggles for justice which does not also point to God's gracious offer of reconciliation and salvation to the poor (in spirit) is likewise a caricature." CCAP's Department of Church and Society is deeply involved in advocacy, speaking truth to government leaders, and the CCAP's engagement in community health evangelism reminds us that sustainable community development and discipleship are indeed good partners.

The witness of the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda, which is deeply engaged in the post-genocidal work of justice, forgiveness and reconciliation reminds us to guard a central message of the Gospel, of reconciliation to God and each other, from becoming captive to a current American cultural dynamic which promotes division and hatred. Participants in the 2019 International Peacemaking trip to Rwanda saw this firsthand and are special ambassadors of this message.

The Women of the Protestant Church of Congo have also borne witness to PC(USA) by the way that they engage in a faithful witness to the Gospel through their Bible-based children's trauma healing program. They have bravely stepped into places of great danger to address the needs of children who have been exposed to horrific violence, and they accompany this with advocacy for their government to end the carnage. Their brave work reminds us of Jesus' mandate to be ready to sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel.

And we often receive the witness from the global church from immigrant congregations and individuals within the PC(USA) who help us to see the Gospel with new eyes. Faith Evanson and Lodia Yanga, Sudanese immigrants from the Beechmont Presbyterian Church youth group in Louisville, were part of the 2018 Kentucky delegation to Ecumenical Advocacy Days and were chosen as lead speakers in visits to Capitol Hill to advocate for just and compassionate immigration policies. Their bold pleas to the halls of power, as well as the vibrant presence of immigrants in the PC(USA) which enlivens our worship and witness, remind us to hold fast to the Gospel imperative of Mathew 25 to welcome the stranger even though there are many voices around us signaling that immigrants and refugees are anything but welcome.

And as we enter into the work of mutual mission, we need to remember that we do have something to give as well as receive. The Confession of Belhar's clarion call for unity, reconciliation and racial justice is an amazing gift to the PC(USA). The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, out of which Belhar emerged, has recognized that the PC(USA) also has valuable experiences to share from the American struggle against racial oppression and for civil rights. The URCSA is engaging PC(USA) in a conversation in which we have committed to being "accountability partners" as we live into The Confession of Belhar's vision, not only in exposing and addressing racism and white supremacy, but also with respect to such matters as gender, immigration and refuge, LGBTQ rights and dignity and fair access to education.

Yes, relationships with the global church and immigrant congregations are transforming Presbyterian congregations around the country and helping us to stay true to the Gospel. Former Denver Presbytery Executive Rev. Tom Sheffield, Convener of the Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique Mission Network has these thoughts to share about the Denver's long-standing partnership with Zimbabwe: "Many have found that getting to know people from Zimbabwe is the heart of being church. Forming relationships is the way we become a global church." If your congregation or presbytery is already in a global partnership, we would encourage you to lean in, get involved with a heart open to learning more deeply what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and if you wish to engage in such a relationship, please reach out to Presbyterian World Mission. And get ready to roll up your sleeves, for as Rev. Sheffield states, "Partnership is not something one does; it is something one lives. It is hard work. The more we go to Zimbabwe, I say, the less we know. The more we go, the deeper we go, the more we open ourselves to each other, and discover how complex we ALL are."

Amen.